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ABSTRACT

Social studies teachers can involve their students in an issues-oriented curriculum by using the least expensive, least threatening medium available, the newspaper. The newspaper's stock in trade is the relevant, timely issue--just what is missing from all too many social studies classrooms. In dealing with issues in social studies classrooms, teachers are only limited by their imaginations. For example, three specific issues that can be explored through the use of the newspaper are gun control, capital punishment, and societal roles. Each issue can become an activity unit that would be approximately 1 to 2 weeks in length. A collection of news articles, editorials, letters to the editor, syndicated columns, editorial cartoons, and even advertisements would be useful to a discussion of gun control. The controversy surrounding capital punishment can be explored through a study of editorial pages. The advertising media of newspapers is a good place to examine how societal roles are changed or perpetuated. (Discussion questions and sequential activities are suggested for each topic issue.) (HOD)

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THE NEWSPAPER IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM: AN ISSUE ORIENTED CURRICULUM

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Social Studies today is suffering from a crisis in confidence. The crisis centers around its credibility as a meaningful part of students' lives. For many educators, the relevancy of social studies is self-evident. However, the research literature from the field tells of an entirely different story. A compilation of many sources can be found in three National Foundation Studies[1] and in the rationale for Project SPAN[2]. Basically, from the research, it appears that the curriculum revolutions of the sixties and seventies passed social studies by. The dominant instructional tool continues to be the textbook, instructional methods are mostly large-group, teacher controlled recitation and lecture (based for the most part on the text), knowing is mostly information-oriented, teachers tend to rely on external motivation (grades, rewards, approval, etc.), and history and government still dominate the curriculum.

While social studies has remained more or less constant, the society has not. The methods employed in many classes have not changed significantly since the turn of the century. However, the students have. They are more willing to question the worth of the curriculum, less willing to read (especially a monstrous text), and certainly more media oriented. Hence, the teacher should employ techniques and materials that will appeal to the student of today. One way is by having students develop skills needed to make rational decisions by looking at social issues and examining alternatives relevant to their lives. Teachers should help students actively explore the important issues of past and

[1]National Science Foundation. What are the Needs in Precollege Science, Mathematics, and Social Studies Education? Views from the Field. Washington, D.C.: National Science Foundation SE 80-9, 1980

[2]Douglas P. Superka, Sharryl Hawke, and Irving Morrissett. "The Current and Future Status of Social Studies." Social Education XLIV (May 1980): 362-369

present, emphasizing the knowledge important for peoples' roles as citizens. Many teachers would agree with such an assertion, but claim that this is difficult to do because such material is often not found in the textbook. Moreover, in a decade of declining enrollments and fiscal cutbacks, districts are not likely to invest heavily in non-traditional forms of instructional aids with its high cost.

Enter the newspaper ..... Not only is the newspaper inexpensive, but it also is a virtual gold mine of the types of material not often found in standard texts. Moreover, it is an adult medium, non-textual in format, non-threatening to students and, for many, an already established part of their daily routine. Newspapers' stock in trade is the relevant, timely issue - an aspect missing from all too many social studies classrooms.

But how can the newspaper best be implemented as a teaching resource? The sample issues and activities which follow present some strategies social studies teachers can utilize to involve their students in an issues oriented curriculum by using the least expensive, least threatening medium available - the newspaper, a daily testament to the numerous issues, controversial and important which continually surface and resurface, impacting our lives and the lives of our students.

In dealing with issues in social studies classes, the teacher is only limited by his (her) imagination. For the purpose of this article, three specific issues which have a potential impact on students' lives will be discussed. Collectively they would include gun control, capital punishment, and the issue of societal roles.

Each issue - activity unit would be approximately one to two weeks in length, allowing for adequate collection of newspaper material, class discussion, and the culminating activity.

First, gun control. As an issue, it has many manifestations which touch students directly. Is the American preoccupation with owning guns partly responsible for the increase of violent crime in this country? Is gun ownership a right? Is it too easy to obtain weapons in the United States? Does this availability lead to violent crime? Should "Saturday Night Specials" be outlawed? Do we need national gun control? Should there be a minimum prison sentence for convicted felons who use handguns or other weapons in their crimes? ... even if no one gets hurt? Is a society that condones and encourages violence prone to continuous violence?

To help the students address these and the many other questions swirling around this controversial issue, the following activity sequence can be utilized:

1. Divide the class in half, with each half responsible for collecting material from the newspaper that can be used to argue in favor of, or against gun control. This material should not be limited to news articles but can also include: editorials, letters to the editor, syndicated columns, editorial cartoons and even advertisements.
2. Each side could construct a bulletin board or collage of their materials in an effort to represent their viewpoint.
3. Presentations can be made, either by individuals speaking for themselves or representing the group. Care should be taken to represent a variety of opinions covering the spectrum of gun control vs. no

gun control so that students can see and articulate the concept that there are many different points of opinion along a "continuum" of thought.

4. A culminating writing exercise would be for students, after class discussion of pro and con (and the points between) to decide individually what their opinion is on this issue. Each student, without consultation with classmates, parents or the teacher, writes an editorial of 250-500 words articulating their viewpoint.

Second, capital punishment. The controversy surrounding legal state executions is not new, but the arguments in the headlines today are. Some of them center around the entire philosophy of human rights and corrections. Do prisoners have rights. What are the purposes of prisons? Should prisons be humane places? Is capital punishment humane? Should the death penalty be abolished? Is the death penalty a deterrant to crime? Is execution a morally defensible response to crime? What is a just punishment?

Using a newspaper and the sequential activities that follow, students can explore not only the issue itself and their own attitudes, but can also participate in an exercise designed to show just how a newspaper deals editorially with such an important issue:

1. Begin with a study of the editorial page of your daily newspaper. Isolate and study the parts of that page: editorials, editorial cartoon, letters to the editor, guest editorials, syndicated columnists.

2. Next, using newspaper articles and materials from any source available, have the class read and discuss source material on capital punishment, our corrections system and other aspects of the judicial-penal system.

3. Once the issues involved become more clear to the class, and there has been adequate time for reading and discussion, select some members of the class to write letters to the editor, some to write, (as a group editorial board) an editorial on some aspect of the issues under discussion. Students with artistic aptitude might draw an editorial cartoon. Finally, appoint a few students to write "guest editorials", others to be syndicated columnists.

4. Finally, as a class project, pull all the sections together, composing a replica of an editorial page as it might appear in a newspaper the day before, or the day after a controversial execution.

Last, is the issue of societal roles. Of prime interest today is the question of how society, through the socialization process, determine sexual roles for women? How does the advertising media perpetuate (or change) those roles? Should the advertising media be encouraged to change the image of those roles? Can women perform traditional male social and economic roles and thereby act as a model and a catalyst for change? Is a person who does not conform to established societal procedures and role identification necessarily a danger to that society?

The first question a newspaper answers is the "who" of any story. But the advertisements are as populated with role models as the stories. The following

sequence of activities can be used to make students see the subtle messages in the news and the ads:

1. Have students cut advertisements from daily papers for a review and class discussion on how the advertiser's portray male - female roles and relationships. Other than a message indicating the value of a particular product, what more subtle societal message is being transmitted?

2. Reading and discussing articles appearing during the duration of this unit on men's and women's changing roles in society.

3. Copies of what used to be called the "Woman's" section can be brought to class. Compare these older samples with recent copies of what is now generally called the "Living" or "Lifestyles" sections of the paper. How do they differ both in content and tone? What attitude do they take toward their readers, both male and female?

4. Finally, using the newspaper ads which began the unit, have students work individually or in small groups to rewrite the ad copy and alter the art work. Their goal should be to remove societal stereotypes, focusing the ad solely on the value and usefulness of the product in question. A discussion on the finished work should include such points as: How much have the ads been changed? Are they as effective as they were? Must some stereotyping be done to sell some products?

Obviously, no article of this length can fully explore the numerous topics that an issues oriented social studies curriculum must address. Nor is it possible to adequately detail the multitude of ways a newspaper can be used to bring these issues into the social studies classroom.

The purpose here is not to be all inclusive, but to direct the teacher's attention to the need for issues oriented instruction, the wealth of issues extant, and the unique applicability of the newspaper for such a curriculum.

A dynamic, relevant social studies curriculum can be achieved at a cost that is not prohibitive to most school districts. It is hoped that the teacher who embarks on such a voyage of discovery as herein described will quickly realize that the avenues open are limited, not by this short article, but only by imagination and the creativity a social studies teacher brings to his or her classroom.